

## ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

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COMMITTEE	Licensing Committee
DATE	1 September 2015
DIRECTOR	Angela Scott (Acting Director)
TITLE OF REPORT	Taxi Licences – Permitted Roof Signs
REPORT NUMBER	CG/15/94

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### 1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

The report reiterates the current types of approved taxi roof sign used in Aberdeen and provides the Committee with a proposed approach on how to clarify its policy on the permitted types of sign.

### 2. RECOMMENDATION(S)

That the Licensing Committee instructs officers to maintain the status quo with the approved list of roof signs and take action to enforce these licensing requirements where necessary.

### 3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no additional financial implications in maintaining the status quo with the taxi roof signs, whereas there would be various financial implications in approving and supplying new types of signs.

In order to ensure that signs are compliant with the licensing authority's policies and conditions of licence they are purchased and supplied by the authority to the licence holders on a loan basis. The authority ensures that the signs have the appropriate wording on them to indicate that the taxi is licensed by Aberdeen City Council.

In practice any change to introduce a new type of sign would require the Taxi Inspection Centre to purchase a batch of the new signs and arrange for the appropriate wording to be embossed on them. The taxi operators who wished to use the signs would then pay a deposit which would be refunded to them upon return of the roof sign, as is the case with the currently approved signs. Their current deposit would also require to be returned to them.

If these new roof signs were introduced they could only be used up until 6 June 2017 when the taxi fleet becomes entirely accessible vehicles, and once they were returned thereafter the authority could be left with a number of used roof signs that it may not be possible to resell.

The costs of administering the licensing system require to be covered by the corresponding licence fees and therefore the cost of purchasing new signs would be taken into account when calculating such fees.

We anticipate the new type of sign would cost around £60 ea. and the refund of the deposit would be £35.

The existing saloon signs are £80 ea. (refund £40) and the airport and accessible vehicle signs are £60 (refund £35).

At the moment there are 495 saloon taxis. We do not know exactly how many signs would be required, although it appears that we would have to place an order for a minimum of 8 signs, therefore the approximate initial outlay would be £480. This could be multiplied many times over if there were to be a demand for the signs, which is not improbable.

Currently we have 12 (saloon) signs in stock, which is around the average number that are held at the Taxi Inspection Centre at any one time and is the level of stock that they would seek to maintain. Some of these signs can be sold as separate parts, i.e. base and/or upper section.

The resource costs to introduce the new signs, in terms of officer time, are likely to be much more significant in respect of the administration, monitoring and checking (at taxi tests).

It is anticipated that officers would be required to deal with trade complaints about any such change as it would be controversial and may be seen by many in the trade as an inappropriate use of existing licence fees, as well as an unnecessary addition that could lead to increased licence fees next year.

#### 4. OTHER IMPLICATIONS

None.

#### 5. BACKGROUND/MAIN ISSUES

The Committee requested a report on taxi roof signs, including the update to their roof sign condition of licence, which has already been dealt with. This report provides the Committee with an opportunity to

clarify the approved types of roof sign which are the only type that should be used on Aberdeen City taxis.

As the Committee is aware:

- a. roof signs distinguish between taxis which are permitted to pick up on the street and licensed private hire cars which are not;
- b. approved roof signs help distinguish between Aberdeen City Council licensed taxis that are allowed to ply for hire in the city streets and licensed taxis from other areas which are not; and
- c. functioning roof signs (i.e. signs that light up when the vehicle is available for hire) make it easier for passengers to identify available taxis in the street, especially at night time.

There are currently three main types of roof sign that are approved by the licensing authority, as follows:

- a. Standard full width of the car roof (for saloons), with text which shows that the vehicle is an Aberdeen City licensed taxi;
- b. Smaller green airport sign; and
- c. Two models of smaller sign for accessible taxi vehicles, with a sloping roof, that do not have an inbuilt roof sign.

There is also a newer and smaller type of sign that has not been approved by the licensing authority but is in use on some Aberdeen taxis. This is what led to the debate over permitted roof signs.

A local taxi business in Aberdeen supplies and installs these newer roof signs. This business advised that they began to supply the sign to meet requests from Aberdeen's taxi drivers. It is of a more modern design than the existing standard licensing authority approved (saloon) sign which is around 20 years old. It has an LED light, is aero-dynamic and is shorter, at around 24 inches. They also advised that road trials had demonstrated that these signs were less noisy and more eco-friendly than the larger licensing authority approved sign. Furthermore, they stated that the new sign could comply with the Committee's condition of licence as it can be easily switched on or off and the "City of Aberdeen" and "Taxi" wording could be emblazoned thereon.

Anecdotally the reason often given by drivers to support their decision to use the new smaller sign on saloons is that they would save fuel and therefore money due to the superior aerodynamics. This appears to be a misnomer as any aerodynamic difference would be limited and would only really have a statistically significant effect at higher speeds.

For example, most aerodynamic effects on a vehicle, due to body shape etc. only take effect at speeds of 35mph or over. Differences due to spoilers only take effect at 80mph or over. An empty roof rack will reduce fuel economy by 10% but again only at speeds of 35mph or over. It appears that the difference between a large and small roof sign would be 1-2% in terms of fuel economy but again it is only likely to have an appreciable effect at 35mph plus.

Since the majority of taxi work involves journeys entirely within the city, i.e. 30mph areas, taxis would have to be speeding by a substantial margin for the majority of their journeys in order to actually save fuel as a result of aerodynamic differences in a roof sign.

The established practice is that separate roof signs (that are not in-built) are supplied by the licensing authority at the Taxi Inspection Centre ("TIC"). When a roof sign is supplied to a taxi licence holder they pay a deposit, which must be refunded to them once they return the sign. One of the main reasons for this practice is to ensure that only licensing authority approved signs are used on taxis, which creates uniformity that in turn helps with the easy identification of Aberdeen City taxis. This approach appears generally to have been approved of by the local taxi trade.

The TIC licensing authority approved signs display the necessary Aberdeen City Taxi wording. If the Committee wishes to permit the new type of sign the TIC would have to purchase a batch of those signs and have the wording added to them before they could supply them to the trade.

There is another relevant matter that may have a bearing on the Committee's considerations in this regard. As Members are aware, by 6 June 2017 all taxis require to be accessible vehicles. As such after that stage it will only be necessary to have two types of sign: i) roof signs that are approved for use on accessible taxis operating in the city zone; and, ii) those that are approved for use on accessible taxis operating in the airport zone.

Consequently once the taxi fleet becomes fully accessible in less than two years' time the new saloon taxi roof signs (if permitted) would become obsolete. The licensing authority would then have to refund the roof sign deposits to taxi licence holders.

Given these timescales it appears not to be a cost beneficial measure to now introduce a new type of sign. This is because it would increase the outlay by the licence holders and the licensing authority for new

signs in the short term and then come June 2017 refunds would be required.

In addition to this it is anticipated that separate roof signs may not be so readily required in future as many of the purpose built accessible taxis will already have an in-built roof sign.

The Committee may wish to consider whether overall it would be of benefit to permit the new type of signs for what would effectively be a period of only two years, given the changes this would necessitate for the trade and the licensing authority. If circumstances were different, and it was the case that the signs were to be in use for the foreseeable future, it may well have been recommended to update the type of sign to a more modern and aero-dynamic design.

For information, once the fleet has become fully accessible by June 2017 the Taxi Testing Manual will be updated by officers, i.e. the standard full width (saloon taxi) roof sign shall be removed from the list as it will no longer be required as a consequence of there being no more saloon taxis. Private hire cars will remain as saloons.

### Consultation

Various responses have been received and taken into consideration, including with regard to the financial, enforcement and practical implications.

## 6. IMPACT

Corporate – The recommendations support compliance with licence conditions and the good governance of the taxi licensing function.

Public – This report may be of interest to members of the public who use taxi services and particularly those who wish to hail taxis on the street.

Ensuring that all taxi roof signs can be easily seen and read and that they are clearly distinguishable from other authorities' signs is of benefit to the public and the trade. It also supports enforcement of the rules in terms of the licensing regime.

Equality - This report appears to be of interest equally to members of the public and persons who have a protected characteristic therefore an Equality and Human Rights Impact Assessment has not been provided.

## 7. MANAGEMENT OF RISK

It appears that the proposed approach reduces any potential risk of non-compliance with the licensing authority's policies and conditions of licence, as it clarifies the position for relevant licence holders.

## 8. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Conditions Applicable to Taxi Licences (City and Airport)
- Taxi Testing Manual
- Aberdeen City Council, Licence Application Fees w/e/f 1 April 2015

## 9. REPORT AUTHOR DETAILS

Paul M Connolly  
Solicitor (Litigation and Licensing Team)

Direct Dial: 01224 522357

Email: [pconnolly@aberdeencity.gov.uk](mailto:pconnolly@aberdeencity.gov.uk)